

## **Traveling blimp flies over Hub with the greatest of breezes**

By **Jennifer Heldt Powell**

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That little tiny blimp floating so effortlessly above Fenway is really huge. It's like a great big building that just drops out of the sky.

The way it floats down, it looks light - like a big balloon. But the dirigible really weighs four tons and requires a team of strong handlers to keep it under control when it's on the ground.

The gondola hanging underneath is the size of a large van and seats nine. It's equipped with comfy leather chairs, but it's highly recommended that passengers use the facilities before taking off.

Perhaps I should have been scared as I climbed onboard, but I was too excited.

I was there to see for myself what it's like to be a client of Wallbounce, a new provider of unique experiences. This one was a ride on the Sanyo Lightship, one of the largest blimps in the world.



The Sanyo Lightship flies over treetops in Boston  
(Staff photo by Lisa Hornack)

Giddy with anticipation, we donned head sets and buckled our seatbelts. Would it be a bumpy ride? No, as it turns out. But it was thrilling.

"Do you like amusement park rides?" the pilot said with a twinkle in his eye.

Within seconds the blimp had risen 300 feet.

Our pilot, Allan Patrick Judd, was happy to show off a bit as he explained the lightship's stunning capabilities.

It keeps its speed - about 35 miles an hour at that point - even when climbing, he said, pointing the blimp nearly straight up in the air. It maintains speed even when dipping down, he said, pointing the blimp practically straight at the ground.

Judd maneuvers the ship up and down with a wheel on the side of his chair. He turns it from side to side with foot pedals.

It works because the air outside the envelope, the part that says "Sanyo," is heavier than the non-flammable helium inside. It bobs gently like a ship over waves, riding large air bubbles that rise from the earth's surface. Warmer days mean more bubbles and a choppier ride.

Judd, a former airplane pilot and boating enthusiast, was given a blimp ride for his birthday a long time ago. It was immediately familiar - a cross between a ship and a plane. He knew then he wanted to pilot it.



"I was able to fly and yet be in a boat," he said.

He's been doing it now for 20 years, traveling around the country and living out of a car.

"This is where I come to have fun," he said. "I play up here. When I'm back on the ground, it's more like work."

The crew that helps to land the lightship and take care of it travels too, moving from city to city as wind and schedules call. They'll cover about 70,000 miles this year.

The ship is used to promote the electronics maker's name across the country. When it's not free floating, it's filming drag racing and golf under a quintessential symbiotic marketing relationship. The filming is done for free with the expectation that Sanyo will get mentioned during the broadcast.

After all these years, Judd has honed his technique - smooth and quiet for golf, quicker and closer to the action for drag racing.

The highlight of the job, however, is giving rides to children, he said. At nearly every stop, the Sanyo offers rides to ill kids from local hospitals.

Judd has become quite a philosopher, looking down on the world for so many years.

"It's going very fast," he said. "And like any entity, it needs to stay healthy."

From the air, he said he can see the effects of the traffic and the growth.

As for me, I spent my time trying to orient myself with familiar landmarks - the Zakim Bridge, Logan Airport, the State House, my house, Park Street Church, Fenway Park. It was like riding over a map with moving pieces. You can't see the people, but you can see the cars: I-93 South was jammed, I noted, planning to take a different route home.

Like many, Judd has enjoyed watching the Big Dig's restoration of the city.

"You're going to end up with a beautiful park," he said.

From the air it looks as though the project is shaping up to be a river of green running through the city.

From the blimp, Massachusetts looks flat and Boston looks small. You can see more clearly the contrast of the tightly packed city and the open suburbs with big homes and even bigger lawns.

If I'd been up there much longer, perhaps I too, would have waxed philosophical.